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Library of Congress

Reading the Revolutionary Mail

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WASHINGTON, March 17— One member of Congress is carrying on a flirtation by mail with the prominent wife of the United States representative while he is off in Paris. Another member comments with disdain on his colleagues' drinking, suggesting that because of it Congress shouldn't try to meet in the afternoon. Other members write about crime or the weather.

Such is the stuff of history, the nitty-gritty and the mundane, that is obvious in letters to and from the earliest members of Congress. The letters, dated 1774 to 1789, are being published by the Library of Congress in an enormous 25-volume undertaking now about half finished.

"We will publish something on the order of 15,000 letters," said the project's editor, Paul H. Smith.

The letters, with diaries and other commentaries, are from the Library of Congress's own collections, from the National Archives, from local historical societies and libraries, and from state archives.

The material is fascinating to dip into, but here is one publishing effort that will never make the best-seller list. The press run is for a few thousand of each volume, with the books going to research, university and foreign libraries at about \$20 per volume, a price that is subsidized by the Government.

Some of the letters are about issues of war and peace (Have the British sent a strong force into Georgia?), some address questions of everyday life (Can a British sympathizer send for her dresses in Philadelphia, from which she has just hurriedly fled as the Americans took the city?) and some are, well, tantalizing.

Abigail, John and James

That wife of the American diplomat in Paris was Abigail Adams. Her diplomat husband, of course, was John Adams, a future President. They pined for each other. Enter James Lovell, the chairman of a Congressional foreign affairs committee, who had a professional correspondence with Adams and an exchange of a different sort with his wife.

"Abigail was very much interested in Lovell," said Lynne With-ey, a historian who wrote "Dearest Friend: A Life of Abigail Adams" (Free Press/Macmillan), in 1981. "They carried out this flirtation in the letters."

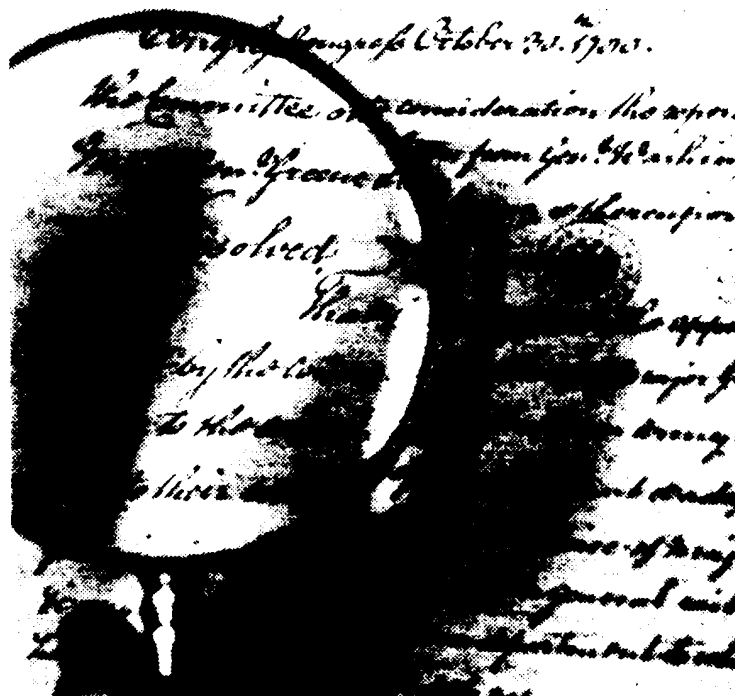
But Miss Withey and others made clear that the flirtation never extended beyond letters and never damaged the marriage, which was to last 54 years. Adams knew of the correspondence, Dr. Smith said.

"John was in France," Miss Withey said, "and Abigail was very depressed and lonely, and this dashing, charming man was interested in her. It was flattering to her."

In the letters, Lovell addresses Abigail as "Portia," from the name of the brilliant lawyer in "The Merchant of Venice."

In a letter dated Sept. 12, 1778, he wrote: "I have the Mortification of being obliged to tell the amiable Portia that the Council of Pennsylvania will not grant a partial Exportation of Flour from their State while the general Embargo lasts: So that I cannot soon have the Pleasure of executing the Commission which that lovely Woman has entrusted to me."

Lovell refers to the absent John as "your best Friend," as on March 9, 1779, when he wrote: "I



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Section of letter from Congress to George Washington in October 1780.

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would close here by telling you how affectionately I esteem you, if I was not sure it would rather mortify than please you while your mind is anxious to know how this indecisive Assembly intend to dispose of your best Friend."

Following are excerpts from other letters being published:

From a letter by Gouverneur Morris, a member of Congress, to Robert R. Livingston, May 13, 1778:

Make my Love to all my Friends Male and Female particularly the latter for whom I feel an Attachment proportioned to the Distance they are from me. It is strange but it is that we love our Friends more when absent.

From Samuel Holton's diary:

June 25, 1778: Attended in Congress. Towards night I walked out with a number of Gentlemen in Congress about a mile, to a farm house. The people was kind, we eat Charies & drank whisky.

Sept. 9, 1778: Congress Sit but half the day; In the evening I met a Number of Gentlemen of Congress upon Business at the City Tavern.

Jan. 29, 1779: The Honl. Mr. Henry dined with us. Colo. Nevers and Capt. Rogers from Nova Scotia came & informed me of the state of that province. Thawey weather.

From an unsent footnote to a letter to a Congressional committee from Charles Thomson, Secretary of Congress, dated Sept. 9, 1779:

Note. Should any sensible writer in the next century chance in his researches to find this paper he will be apt, in descanting upon the matters of the present time, to compare them with those of the age of Charlemagne & think there was a necessity of reviving some of the cartularies of that wise prince & especially that which enjoined judges to hold courts in the morning with an empty stomach to pre-

vent the disgrace of being seen drunk even in a court of Justice, and will be rejoiced at having found as he will imagine the true reason why motions for sitting twice a day were so often overruled by Congress."

From another unsent footnote in the Thomson letter to the committee, referring to an antagonist in Congress, Henry Laurens, who was a slave owner:

This outrageous language and insolent behaviour may be attributed to his want of education and to his having been bred among negro slaves over whom he had been accustomed to tyrannize & against whom he could vent his ill humours & turbulent passions not only with impunity but to effect.

From a letter from Henry Laurens to Benedict Arnold, Aug. 7, 1778:

Congress are much interrupted in the course of business in their Sessions at the State House by the beating of Drums & noise of the Soldiery at the Guard House. Will you be so obliging as to give the necessary order for preventing in future the inconvenience complained of.

From a letter from John Jay to John Hancock, Dec. 26, 1778:

No Intelligence of any Importance hath lately been received from any Quarter, except an inaccurate Account of the Enemy having made an Incursion into Georgia with Eleven hundred Men.

From John Fell's diary, Dec. 28, 1778:

Went to Congress, but not being Members sufficient no Congress.

Signature of Thomas Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, on 1780 letter to George Washington.

Y most humble servt

